

Cayo Coco: In the Gardens of the King

By Chris Robinson

Chris Robinson, host of Canada's most popular radio travel shows, shares why he chose Cayo Coco in Cuba for his own family vacation.

In 1492, just 15 days after Columbus discovered America, he set foot on Cuba and described it as "The most beautiful land human eyes have ever seen." A few years later, the first Governor of Cuba, Diego Velazques, completed the conquest of the island for the Spanish. He was so enchanted by the coral keys off the North Coast of this beautiful land that he named them Los Jardines del Rey: "The Garden of the King".

If Columbus and Velazques were around today, not only would I employ them as travel writers, but they would also still recognize the natural paradise of Cayo Coco. It is still the sandy slice of heaven it was centuries ago, apart from a handful of modern resorts and the impressive 27 km causeway that now connects the coral key to mainland Cuba.

It was this un-spoilt eco-paradise that tempted me to introduce Cuba for the first time to my wife and two young sons. That, and a beautiful resort called NH Krystal Laguna Villas & Resort, which nestles on the island of Cayo Coco, partially built over a mangrove lagoon and backed by sandy dunes and a magnificent stretch of beach facing the Atlantic Ocean.



NH Krystal Laguna Villas & Resort opened four years ago to rave reviews, not only from individual vacationers but also from hard-to-please travel journalists. It was a joint Canadian and Cuban project, managed by Canadians, and partly owned by some very famous Canadian hockey players. Serge Savard, renowned defenseman of the Montreal Canadiens, put together a consortium of hockey buddies

waters of the mangrove lagoon that separates the resort from the dunes and the beach. They are connected to both by wooden walkways from which the boys fished and watched the lagoon aquatic life, while Mum and Dad watched the sunset over the mangroves with a gin and tonic in hand.

Add a kids' club, a lively disco and evening entertainment, all kinds of sporting activities, and a wide

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as investors, including Wendel Clark and Curtis Joseph. Last year it was bought by NH hotels.

We stayed in one of the villas that are a feature of the resort. These cottage-like chalets are built on stilts just above the crystal

variety of excellent a la carte restaurants serving everything from lobster to steaks flown in from Canada, and this resort was a great hit with all the members of the family!

But, wonderful as NH Krystal Laguna Villas & Resort most





assuredly is, it would be a pity not to emerge from its idyllic cocoon to see why Columbus and Velazquez were so impressed with this land. So we took several trips, challenged to find experiences that would appeal to Timmy then aged 7 and Pip aged 12, as well as two jaded travel professionals... We were not disappointed!

First on the list was a local trip to the neighbouring key of Cayo Guillermo for an aquatic safari in the complex maze of mangrove lagoons and channels. We set off across the diamond waters in a winding convoy of small powerboats, safely enabling Pip to take the controls as we weaved through winding channels in the pristine interface between the fresh-water and marine worlds. Both Timmy and Pip were delighted by the opportunity to don snorkels and masks and cool off. They drifted with the tidal currents down one of the sinuous channels, accompanied by a rich and fascinating assembly of tropical fish. What a fabulous window on the underwater world of this unique environment.

Next was a trip across the causeway to the mainland, en route to the local town of Moron. Despite the unfortunate name, Moron is a charming and typical Cuban country town. And that is its attraction: there are no great monuments or museums here – this is a town to stroll around, soaking up the ambience of Cuba and its people. We took a horse and buggy ride, stopped for a scrumptious ice cream, looked in a window nosily to watch women rolling cigars and admired the numerous old American cars from the 1950's that

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still bring colour to the side streets of whitewashed walls. On our return over the causeway, we witnessed a pink, shifting haze that was hundreds of Caribbean flamingos sifting food in the saltwater shallows.

Without doubt the highlight of our wanderings was our long day trip to the magical town of Trinidad, on the south coast of Cuba. This town was founded half a millennium ago by none other than Diego Velazquez. Hernan Cortez recruited here for his conquest of the Aztecs in Mexico, and in the nineteenth century Trinidad was the centre of wealthy sugar plantations. Then, time stopped in Trinidad. Caught in its fortunate time-warp, this wonderful town of colonial manor houses, churches and cobbled streets is unique in the Americas, and truly justifies the long journey. We wandered happily among the markets and bell towers.

The children were more interested in the toy cars made from old tin cans in the street market than the status of the town as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

But again, the stars of the show were the ordinary Cuban people. In shops, in the street, standing in doorways or on the ornate balconies over the cobbled alleys, they embraced each of us with their warmth and friendliness. For us, perhaps the most memorable moment of our holiday came when we visited a master potter busy at his wheel in a craft market.

He looked up from his emerging creation, spotted Pip and Timmy, and without a commercial thought in his head, he took them under his wing. He showed them how to work his potter's wheel and enabled them to produce whimsical creations that became their most treasured souvenirs of our time in Cuba. And also inspired our most precious memory of many, from the lands of the Garden of the King.

Travel Notes

A number of Canadian Tour Operators feature one and two week vacations to most of the resorts on Cayo Guillermo and the neighbouring island of Cayo Guillermo, including NH Krystal Laguna Villas & Resort.

Insiders tips: Take advantage of the special children's rates for under-13's which are around half of the adult cost at NH Krystal Laguna Villas & Resort, as well as the early booking discount. Also, consider paying the supplement for the villas-in-the-lagoon for a very special stay at NH Krystal Laguna Villas & Resort.

